

The seminar is based on your explanations of these ideas to each other. The extracts are taken from: Stillo, M. and Gauntlett, (n.d.) Antonio Gramsci, *Media/Gender/Identity Resources*. [Online] Date Accessed 1st February 2018. Available at: <http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-gram.htm>

Stillo, M. and Gauntlett, D.(n.d.) Antonio Gramsci, *Media/Gender/Identity Resources*. [Online] Date Accessed 1st February 2018. Available at: <http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-gram.htm>

SOME IDEAS FROM MARX

Understanding Gramsci's theory requires a review of some basic Marxist arguments and assumptions.

ECONOMIC DETERMINATION

Everything in life is determined by capital. The flow of money affects our relations with other persons, with nature and with the world. Our thoughts and goals are the products of property structures. Every cultural activity (culture in its widest sense) is reduced to a direct or indirect expression of some preceding and controlling economic content.

Men find themselves born in a process independent of their will, they cannot control it, they can seek only to understand it and guide their actions accordingly.

CLASS STRUGGLE

The dynamic of a society can only be understood in terms of a system where the dominant ideas are formulated by the ruling class to secure its control over the working class. The latter, exploited by the former, will eventually try to change this situation (through revolution), producing its own ideas as well as its own industrial and political organisation.

BASE / SUPERSTRUCTURE

Marx's deterministic economic conception divides the society in two layers or levels: **base** and **superstructure**.

The first, upon which everything grows, is composed by the material production, money, objects, the relations of production and the stage of development of productive forces. The palpable and tangible world, plus the economic relations that capital generates.

The second, determined by the first, is where we can find the political and ideological institutions, our social relations, set of ideas; our cultures, hopes, dreams and spirit. The world of souls, souls shaped by capital.

According to Marx, we can understand the superstructure in three senses:

- Legal and political expressions which expose existing relation of production;
- Forms of consciousness that express a particular class view of the world;
- The processes in which men become conscious of a fundamental economic conflict and fight it out.

Generally, it is believed that Marx proposed this "one way" relation between economics (down) and ideas (up) as a rigid and severe system. However, the fact is that this is not very clear in Marx and Engel's books. Nevertheless, we can understand almost every Marxist author (and particularly these concerned with cultural issues) as people making an effort to conceive this dependence more dynamically, in order to assume that the analysis of history supposes a social and cultural approach, as well as an economic consideration.

To share with rest of the group your understanding of these ideas by relating these ideas to examples(s) and/or highlighting the key points.

Stillo, M. and Gauntlett, D.(n.d.) Antonio Gramsci, *Media/Gender/Identity Resources*. [Online] Date Accessed 1st February 2018. Available at: <http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-gram.htm>

CONCEPT OF HEGEMONY

"It was Gramsci who, in the late twenties and thirties, with the rise of fascism and the failure of the Western European working-class movements, began to consider why the working class was not necessarily revolutionary, why it could, in fact, yield to fascism." (Gitlin, 1994: 516)

From Gramsci's view, the supremacy of the bourgeoisie is based on two, equally important, facts:

- Economic domination
- Intellectual and moral leadership

What exactly is the meaning of "hegemony"?

"...Dominant groups in society, including fundamentally but not exclusively the ruling class, maintain their dominance by securing the 'spontaneous consent' of subordinate groups, including the working class, through the negotiated construction of a political and ideological consensus which incorporates both dominant and dominated groups." (Strinati, 1995: 165)

- A class had succeeded in persuading the other classes of society to accept its own moral, political and cultural values;
- The concept assumes a plain consent given by the majority of a population to a certain direction suggested by those in power;

However

- However, this consent is not always peaceful, and may combine physical force or coercion with intellectual, moral and cultural inducement;
- Can be understood as "common sense", a cultural universe where the dominant ideology is practiced and spread;
- Something which emerges out of social and class struggles, and serve to shape and influence people's minds;
- It is a set of ideas by means of which dominant groups strive to secure the consent of subordinate groups to their leadership;

"...the practices of a capitalist class or its representatives to gain state power and maintain it later." (Simon, 1982: 23)

Can we conclude that "hegemony" is a strategy exclusively of the bourgeoisie?

No. In fact the working class can develop its own hegemony as a strategy to control the State. Nevertheless, Gramsci stated that the only way to perform this labour class control is by taking into account the interests of other groups and social forces and finding ways of combining them with its own interests.

If the working class is to achieve hegemony, it needs patiently to build up a network of alliances with social minorities. These new coalitions must respect the autonomy of the movement, so that each group can make its own special contribution toward a new socialist society.

The working class must unite popular democratic struggles with its own conflict against the capital class, so as to strengthen a national popular collective will.

How does the hegemonic class manage to maintain its ideology over time?

Hegemony is readjusted and re-negotiated constantly. Gramsci said that it can never be taken for granted, in fact during the post-revolutionary phase (when the labour class has gained control) the function of hegemonic leadership does not disappear but changes its character.

However, he describes two different modes of social control:

- Coercive control: manifested through direct force or its threat (needed by a state when its degree of hegemonic leadership is low or fractured);
- Consensual control: which arises when individuals voluntarily assimilate the worldview of the dominant group (=hegemonic leadership).

In this context, how do we understand the notions of culture and ideology?

- **Culture:** a whole social process, in which men and women define and shape their lives.
- **Ideology:** a system of meanings and values, it is the expression or projection of a particular class interest. The form in which consciousness is at once expressed and controlled, as Raymond Williams has defined it: "...a mistaken interpretation of how the world actually is." (Williams, 1992: 27)

" 'Hegemony' goes beyond 'culture', as previously defined in its insistence on relating the 'whole' social process to specific distributions of power and influence. To say that 'men' define and shape their whole lives is true only in abstraction. In any actual society there are specific inequalities in means and therefore in capacity to realise this process. In a class society these are primarily inequalities between classes. Gramsci therefore introduced the necessary recognition of dominance and subordination in what has still, however, to be recognised as a whole process." (Williams, 1977: 108).

To share with rest of the group your understanding of these ideas by relating these ideas to examples(s) and/or highlighting the key points.

Stillo, M. and Gauntlett, D.(n.d.) Antonio Gramsci, *Media/Gender/Identity Resources*. [Online] Date Accessed 1st February 2018. Available at: <http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-gram.htm>

GRAMSCIANISM ON COMMUNICATIONS MATTERS

From a "Gramscian" perspective, the mass media have to be interpreted as an instrument to spread and reinforce the dominant hegemony... although they could be used by those who want to spread counter-hegemonic ideas too.

"...Pop culture and the mass media are subject to the production, reproduction and transformation of hegemony through the institution of civil society which cover the areas of cultural production and consumption. Hegemony operates culturally and ideologically through the institutions of civil society which characterises mature liberal-democratic, capitalist societies. These institutions include education, the family, the church, the mass media, popular culture, etc." (Strinati, 1995: 168-169)

Different authors (Foucault, Althausser, Feminist theories, etc.) have taken Gramsci's idea of a prominent discourse, reinterpreting and proposing it as a suitable explanation about our culture, the construction of our beliefs, identities, opinions and relations, everything under the influence of a dominant "common sense". Eventually, we can suggest that the media could operate also as a tool of insurrection.

MERITS OF GRAMSCI'S THEORY

Every author who has studied or developed the writings of Gramsci has something different to stress from his theory; by way of illustration I have chosen some of these opinions:

- **David Harris:** He is responsible for the emergence of a critical sociology of culture and for the politicisation of culture.
- **Raymond Williams:** The forms of domination and subordination correspond much more closely to the normal process of social organisation and control in developed societies than the idea of a ruling class, which are usually based on much earlier and simpler historical phases.

- ***Paul Ransome:*** Gramsci resolved two central weakness of Marx's original approach:
 - That Marx was mistaken in assuming that social development always originates from the economic structure;
 - That Marx placed too much faith in the possibility of a spontaneous outburst of revolutionary consciousness among the working class.
- ***Todd Gitlin:*** Gramsci's distinction of culture was a great advance for radical theories, it called attention to the routine structures of everyday 'common sense', which work to sustain class domination and tyranny.
- ***Dominic Strinati:*** Gramsci suggested that there is a dialectic between the process of production and the activities of consumption. He also displayed a lack of dogmatism, unlike some other Marxist authors.

To share with rest of the group your understanding of these ideas by relating these ideas to examples(s) and/or highlighting the key points.

Stillo, M. and Gauntlett, D.(n.d.) Antonio Gramsci, *Media/Gender/Identity Resources*. [Online] Date Accessed 1st February 2018. Available at: <http://www.theory.org.uk/ctr-gram.htm>

FLAWS OF GRAMSCI'S THEORY

As in the previous section, there are a number of critical views about Gramsci's ideas that we could review. Here I have taken some of the more common ones; especially those connected with a communications angle. Nevertheless, there are entire libraries dedicated exclusively to Gramsci and his theories from heterogeneous perspectives; they seem to be an unlimited source of inspiration. Only the most fertile ideas can provoke this amount of analysis.

Dominic Strinati:

From Strinati's point of view the main problem with Gramsci's ideas is the same as with the Frankfurt School's theories and Althusser's work: their Marxist background. A class-based analysis is always reductionist and tends to simplify the relation between the people and their own culture, that is the problem of confining a social theory within the Marxist limits. The deterministic framework does not allow history to contradict the theory, and the interpretation of reality becomes rather elementary.

"People can accept the prevailing order because they are compelled to do so by devoting their time to 'making a living', or because they cannot conceive another way of organising society, and therefore fatalistically accept the world as it is. This, moreover, assumes that the question why people should accept a particular social order is the only legitimate question to ask. It can be claimed that an equally legitimate question is why should people not accept a particular social order?" (Strinati, 1995: 174)

Raymond Williams:

Williams understands that culture is not only a vehicle of domination, he finds preferable a definition of culture as a language of co-operative shaping, of common contribution. He also thinks that Gramsci proposed the concept of hegemony as a uniform, static and abstract structure.

"A lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realised complex of experiences, relationships and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits. In practice, that is, hegemony can never be singular. Its internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis. Moreover (and this is crucial, reminding us of the necessary thrust of the concept), it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own." (Williams, 1977: 112)

Williams finds a third theoretical problem: how the modern citizen can distinguish between alternative and opposed initiatives, between the independent and the reactionary ideas.

Because everything in society could be tied to the hegemonic thoughts, one can say that the dominant culture produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture. The notions of revolution and social change have no sense in these circumstances.

David Harris:

He has mentioned that Gramsci's ideas about the role of intellectuals in society are rather elitist, and all the theory is too political and partisan to be credible. He adds later that another problem of Gramsci's thought is the lack of empiricism, there is no room for studies of audiences, surveys or something related directly with the people and their behaviour.

"...A suitable theory must be capable of avoiding determinism and prioritising struggle; it must contain, or be capable of containing, a suitable linguistics; it must be flexible enough to license, as proper politics, the women's movement, black activism, and any other new social movements as may be announced by the management; it should be able to function in the absence of a strong Communist Party; it must be capable of being applied to an infinite range of specific circumstance; it must be fun to work with, with witty and well written arguments, and intriguing neologism." (Harris, 1992: 198)

Todd Gitlin:

Gitlin's opinion is that Gramsci's ideas, and the later works based upon them, propose a debate that is rather abstract with a concept of cultural hegemony as a "*substance with a life of its own*" settled over the whole public of capitalist societies to confuse the reality. A kind of evil power seeking to colonise our consciousness. But, Gitlin wonders if the fact that the same film (or the same advertisement, or the same article, or the same t.v. programme) is subject to a variety of interpretations, may suggest a crisis of hegemonic ideology, a failure in the cultural programmed minds. Moreover, the success of media in modern societies implies a certain sensitivity to audience tastes, desires and tolerances, in order to perpetuate the system. From Gitlin's perspective the relationship between audiences, media products and culture structures is less inflexible, and more collaborative.

"The cultural hegemony system that results is not a closed system. It leaks. Its very structure leaks, at the least because it remains to some extent competitive." (Gitlin in Newcomb, 1994: 531).

To share with rest of the group your understanding of these ideas by relating these ideas to examples(s) and/or highlighting the key points.

Some useful videos

<https://youtu.be/21u5OeHvd7I> (Gramsci and Hegemony) (18.07 mins)

<https://youtu.be/GNJdcTXQIQc> (Media Theory and hegemony) (2.25 mins)

https://youtu.be/e0gjy_dZQzY (ideological state apparatus) (4.05 mins)

<https://youtu.be/EqS79aqliXY> (Althusser and Ideology) (2.04 mins)